

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 1-B

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POWs probably still held in Vietnam, McFarlane says

By John McCaslin
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President Reagan's national security adviser unintentionally has joined a growing list of past and present government officials who have said that U.S. servicemen still might be held captive in Indochina.

Robert C. McFarlane, assuming remarks he made last Wednesday at a forum of political analysts and businessmen were off the record,

said, "I think there have to be live Americans there.

"There is quite a lot of evidence given by people who have no ulterior motives and no reason to lie, and they're telling things that they have seen," Mr. McFarlane said.

The national security adviser said the United States needs "better human intelligence in Vietnam" and called present dialogue with the Hanoi government "a failure."

Mr. McFarlane was unaware that former one-term congressman John

LeBoutillier, a conservative New York Republican who at one time worked closely with the White House on the POW issue, was recording his comments and would later pass them on to a reporter.

His remarks conflict with past administration statements that the White House was doing all in its power to resolve the MIA issue. More than 2,400 Americans are listed as missing in action in Indochina.

One administration source said yesterday that it appears as if Mr. LeBoutillier, in effect, "egged Mr. McFarlane on and milked the remarks from him."

While Mr. McFarlane declined to comment yesterday, the Pentagon was quick to erase what officials appeared to believe was a misrepresentation of the administration's views. Spokesman Robert Sims said President Reagan and Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger have made the POW-MIA issue a top priority.

Defense Department spokesman and POW specialist Army Maj. Keith Schneider said in a telephone interview yesterday that he was not aware of any new intelligence information that would lead the U.S. government to believe Americans are still being held captive in Southeast Asia.

But Mr. McFarlane is only the latest official to hint at the possibility that Americans captured during the Vietnam War might still be alive and held captive by Hanoi.

His predecessor, former National Security Adviser William Clark, said in 1983 that "information now in our possession disallows us from ruling out the possibility that Americans are still being held against their will."

The former director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, Lt. Gen. Eugene Tighe, told Congress as recently as last June that he believed 50 to 60 Americans still might be held in Communist prisons.

At the time he left the DIA in 1981, he said he believed that there were still American POWs in Southeast Asia. "I have seen nothing to discourage my view," Gen. Tighe said.

Certain accounts given by the last U.S. serviceman to leave Vietnam, Robert Garwood, "sounded reasonable and believable," Gen. Tighe said.

Mr. Garwood, a Marine private first class now on inactive duty while awaiting an appeal of his court martial on charges of collaborating with the enemy, returned to the United States in 1979.

"I've said it before, and I'll say it again: I was not the last American prisoner of war in Vietnam," Mr. Garwood said at a news conference earlier this year. He claims to have seen 50 to 70 American POWs between 1973 and 1978 at various prison camps.

The National Vietnam Veterans Coalition claims to have obtained

intelligence documents within the past year from the CIA, DIA, State Department and White House, which it says prove U.S. soldiers are still being held against their will in both Vietnam and Laos.

Although Hanoi continues to insist that no POWs remain in Vietnam, after meetings in recent weeks with U.S. officials, it has agreed to excavate at least one crash site to search for the remains of U.S. servicemen.

Still, Mr. McFarlane in his remarks last week appeared critical

of U.S. efforts to locate the Americans still unaccounted for. "I wouldn't pretend to you that we have done enough to start. And that's bad. And that's a failure," he said.

An embarrassed Rowland Evans, a syndicated columnist who, with colleague Robert Novak, sponsored the McFarlane forum, said yesterday that he has conducted 28 similar off-the-record forums, "but this is the first breach."

Mr. Evans said he sent Mr. LeBoutillier a message yesterday.

"I think you can imagine what it said," Mr. Evans said.